

Sexual Social Scripts and the re-Imaginations of Community Identity

Maria Fowler

Volume 23, Number 1, 2001

Festival

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087916ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087916ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Fowler, M. (2001). Sexual Social Scripts and the re-Imaginations of Community Identity. *Ethnologies*, 23(1), 45–61. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087916ar>

Article abstract

Drawing from research undertaken at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival in 1997 and 1998, this article explores some of the sociospatial complexities inherent within the queer discourses, performances, and significations of “home” and “homecoming” that play out at the annual event. Paying particular attention to the relationship between the discursive space of the queer “social imaginary” — one which seeks to resist the hegemony of heteronormative sexual social scripts — and the physical space of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, the author considers the ways in which notions and deployments of sameness and difference, inclusion and exclusion, and community consolidation and contestation mark the annual event.

SEXUAL SOCIAL SCRIPTS AND THE RE-IMAGININGS OF COMMUNITY IDENTITY¹

Maria Fowler

McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario

Introduction

I first attended the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in 1995. By that time, the festival had a twenty year history behind it and had become, since its inception in the mid 1970s, the largest and longest running women's festival in North America. For a young dyke like myself, the promise of a primarily lesbian and queer body of participants was particularly alluring, and I had a sense that my journey to the festival would be a pilgrimage of sorts. Still learning to traverse the boundaries of heteronormativity, I had begun to actively seek out spaces, both discursive and material, where I could cultivate and articulate my own emerging sexual and gender identities. Women's Studies classes, lesbian bars, and a cohort of lesbian and queer positive friends and mentors had already provided me spaces within which to imagine and enact identities other than those offered to me by my rural Manitoba homeland. "Michigan" promised one more space to live out that migratory process.²

Migrations, Inta Gale Carpenter suggests, "are made up of individuals who conclude that their problems and needs can best be met outside the native land" (1990: 93). For me, there were no queers in Brandon, Manitoba's, east

-
1. I am grateful to my teachers. Sincere thanks goes to Dr. Pauline Greenhill, whose ongoing support is unprecedented; Dr. Petra Rethmann, who provided me with the space to get this work done and with clear-headed suggestions which made it better; and the women at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival who continue to help me unleash my imagination. Some of this research was funded by a Regular Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, awarded to Dr. Pauline Greenhill.
 2. "Michigan" at the festival and within this paper denotes the festival itself and not the state.

end, nor it seemed, were there any anywhere else in my small “hometown”; “coming-out”, I thought, would have to await larger far-off territories. That home — where I grew up — held neither authenticity nor familiarity for me; neither psycho-emotional construct comfortably intersected with my emergent lesbian subjectivity.

Home, for me, was an imagined future-place, free of the heteronormative sexual social scripts which marked my youth; it was a place I would eventually get to, rather than simply where I came from. In the context of queer migration, then, notions of “home” often become not that place which is left behind, but that which beckons and is sought after. As a point for arrival rather than a point of departure, home signifies a utopian possibility that imprints in the minds of queer migrants a nostalgia for that which is yet to be.

By drawing from research undertaken at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival in 1997 and 1998, I work here to elucidate some of the socio-spatial complexities inherent within the queer discourses, performances, and significations of “home” and “homecoming” that play out at the annual event. Paying particular attention to the relationship between the discursive space of the queer “social imaginary” — one which seeks to resist the hegemony of heteronormative sexual social scripts — and the physical space of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, I unpack the ways in which notions and deployments of sameness and difference, inclusion and exclusion, and community consolidation and contestation mark the annual event.

Built upon a lesbian-feminist and cultural feminist politic in the mid 1970s, the creation of events like the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival reflected a desire on the part of lesbians to create spaces “where a positive collective identity for lesbians is affirmed” (Taylor and Whittier 1992 in Eder *et al.* 1995: 489). Contesting the homogeneous and heterosexist notions of women’s oppression deployed during the early second wave of feminism — notions which centralized the experiences of white, middle class, heterosexual women within a hierarchy of patriarchal power relations — North American lesbians began to stake their own claims in an evolving women’s movement through taking on central roles in the creation of emergent feminist theories, politics, and cultures. Cultural expressions of the political lesbian, drawn from both academic and activist circles, were manifested in the creation of new lesbian-feminist publications that could be accessed through a growing number of women’s bookstores, and precipitated a new genre of “women’s music” which challenged traditional heterosexist representations of female desire. A conscious, but often

contested, creation of lesbian culture and collectivity was cultivated, in part, through a shared participation in women-only, lesbian-centered events like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival.

Built by 600 volunteer workers and attended by 5,000-8,000 participants annually, the six day event forms a temporary but recurring community characterized by its materiality as well as an economy of signs particular to its primarily lesbian, feminist, and queer constituents. It is constructed upon privately owned land located in the midst of one of Michigan's national forests. Within a matter of weeks, each summer the 650 acre site transforms from quiet woodland to a cosmopolitan festival equipped with electricity, running water, shuttle services, three music stages, and a plethora of community tents and services designed to meet the requirements of its diverse constituency. It is described by the festival organizers as

A festival of womyn in the performing arts....A political hotbed of feminist discourse....A recurring dream that surfaces mid winter....A flirt fest....A week when it is safe to walk alone in the woods...A female Brigadoon....A place to try something different, very different... (Michigan Womyn's Music Festival Program 1998).

As a place in which the evolution of lesbian, feminist, and queer politics has been discussed, debated, and evaluated throughout its twenty-five year history, it is a space marked by discourses of collectivity and conflict — discourses which embody the tensions involved in the production and reproduction of community identity: "It's where you come", as one festival participant put it, "to get plugged in; besides all the shit and the stuff that goes on and the controversy... Michigan is home" (Anonymous 1997).

The identification of the festival as a site of homecoming by the woman speaking above is not an idiosyncratic metaphor. Rather, discourses of homecoming circulate as commonplaces among festival participants and organizers prior to, as well as during the event. They appear on internet message boards and in lesbian newsletters used by festival attendees as a way of keeping in touch throughout the year, as well as in literature designed by the festival organizing committee. A festival brochure, for instance, mailed to me months before the 2000 festival, told me that Michigan has "created a space that has become a home to the ideas and expression of women's community" (Brochure 2000). And when I do go to Michigan as a festival participant, after driving hundreds of kilometres, parking my van for hours on a county dirt road, and

then finally arriving inside the festival gates, I am, through performative celebration, welcomed “home”.

For some women then, discourses of homecoming create a point of entry into the annual gathering, and I draw on them in order to create a point of entry into my discussion of some of the ways in which this particular queer/lesbian/feminist space is both materially and discursively constructed; how the collective festival identity is produced and reproduced through shifting dialogues and spatial transgressions. The socio-spatial dynamics found at the festival work to support the notion that “identity is not merely a succession of strategic moves but a highly mobile cluster of claims to self that appear and transmogrify in and of place”; they speak to the ways in which “place is also a mobile imaginary, a form of desire” (Sa’nchez-Eppler and Patton 2000: 4).

Space, Place, and the Politics of Festival

As women who attend the festival are well aware, the acquisition of space is “fundamentally related to social status and power” (Weisman 1994: 1). Concomitantly, it is also related to deployments of identity — both self-fabrication and the imaginings of community. Ethnographically, community has traditionally been conceived of within the context of a particular kind of space; that is, within geographic landscapes such as shared neighbourhoods, villages, or cities. Yet, globalization, increasing migration, and cultures of travel have led to a refiguring of the ethnographic “field” where “communities”, particularly communities in diaspora, are increasingly created and understood within the context of the ideological and discursive spaces they inhabit; here, dialogical landscapes become the terrain where collectivity is produced and reproduced through a nexus of intersecting and diverging discourses of identity (Marcus 1997). In these contexts, explorations into discursive constructions of community identity have replaced traditional sites of ethnographic inquiry.

Because festival brings together individuals who are often geographically dispersed, but whose social imaginaries often resonate at the level of shared community identity, it provides a unique environment in which to examine the ways in which social and material spaces “reflect and rebound upon one another” (Weisman 1994: 9). The congregation of a usually geographically dispersed festival body provides a fleeting, but ethnographically traditional field site in which the complex dynamics between identity politics and the politics of space and place may be mapped in ways particular to diasporal

coalescence. Through an examination of their structure and content then, “festivals can provide an important clue to the degree and kinds of socio-cultural changes, stresses, and conflicts [that occur] within the groups that stage them” (Esman 1982: 199). The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival provides an opportunity for the exploration of the ways in which dispersed communities create, negotiate, transform, and are transformed by the physical spaces they fleetingly inhabit.

My attention to and treatment of the socio-spatial complexities which play out at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival is informed by and draws from works which have focused on how divergent but simultaneously interconnected discourses of local, national, and global identities produce and reproduce notions of self, community, and nation (see Anderson 1983; Abu-Lughod 1997; Edwards 1994; Marcus 1997). Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1991) has, for instance, provided an especially influential framework with which to consider the ways in which collective identities emerge at the level of discourse — what he identifies as the “social imaginary”. Understanding “nation” as an “imagined political community,” Anderson argues that “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1983: 6). Thus, “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these),” he suggests, “are imagined” (1983: 6).

As one who considers herself a member of the festival “community”, and who engages in her own imaginings and re-imaginings of the festival identity, it is important to clarify that “real” lived experience stands not in contrast to the social imaginary as I conceive of it, but exists, instead, as an aspect of it. Since corporeal space is created and occupied within the social rubric which makes its meaning intelligible, it too may be understood as imagined space. We imagine the significance of a desk, and its positioning, for instance, only in the context of its physical and symbolic placement within a nexus of institutional power relations when situated, say, across from us at a job interview. The reality that corporeal and symbolic imaginings cannot easily (if at all) be teased apart suggests that “[t]here is, then, an ongoing dialectical relationship between social space and physical space” (Weisman 1992: 24). In the same way, the site of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, as it is anticipated, remembered *and* traversed by the festival constituent is always experienced at the level of the imaginary.

With this in mind, I argue along with Anderson that “[c]ommunities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (1983: 6). The collective festival identity emerges, in part, through a diasporic consciousness embedded within a social imaginary of the festival constituent marked by a set of stylized claims to collective that are reminiscent of boundary strategies evoked and deployed in constructions and performances of nation and citizenship.

Sex, Gender, and the Territorialization of Festival

Taylor and Whittier (1992) note that “[w]omen’s music festivals, feminist book stores, spirituality groups, and other institutions and cultural events — which are largely supported by lesbian feminists — are all boundary strategies” (in Eder *et al.* 1995: 489). As a strategy for the creation of collective identity, they seek to render present, through artifact and event, an absent women’s culture and community. They become, most significantly, communicative spaces and devices which carry with and in them possibilities for the construction, as well as the affirmation, of lesbian identity. Through framing lesbian bodies and discourses in ways that facilitate an interpolation of positive collective identity, these discursive and material spaces, created by women for women, challenge dominant constructions about lesbian lives.

Illustrating the interconnectedness between representation and lesbian space, one woman interviewed at the 1998 festival described it as a site in which the diversity of women’s sexual and gender identities are forefronted in ways particular to a “womyn-only” space; she states:

There’s just more room here. It’s only women to fill all the spaces and we do fill all the spaces. I think there’s a kind of invisibility about the way we actually are always filling all the spaces in the world. That really, there’s a range of spaces and ways of relating in the world that are filled by people. There’s just no way to my mind that — in the world at large — that women aren’t all over filling every kind of space. But there’s a kind of invisibility to it in the world at large because those aren’t the spaces they’re expecting women to fill: identity spaces, gender spaces (Anonymous).

Implicit within this participant’s representation of the festival space is an acknowledgment that the festival is *itself* a space of representation; a place where the diversity of women’s sexual and gender identities are displayed against one another in a way that forefronts and renders present gendered juxtapositions

which are obfuscated by the dominance of heteronormative expectation in the world at large. Her commentary reveals the “dialect in the lived world between spaces of representation and representation of spaces” and elucidates the ways in which the Michigan Festival acts as a physical site of resistance against hegemonic modes of appropriate sex/gender behavior (Keith and Pile 1993: 10).

In this sexualized space — that is, a space in which the collective identity has been forged through the identification of sex (woman) and sexuality (lesbian) as rallying points — changing assumptions about the nature and place of sexual social scripts have underwritten as well as challenged community identity in a number of ways. Indeed, the negotiation of sexual social scripts lies at the heart of the festival’s origins, and marks a good many of the internal conflicts which have taken place within the evolving festival community. Pauline Greenhill suggests that sexual social scripts can be understood as embodying

assumptions about sex — the biological makeup of females and males; assumptions about gender — the social constructions that go along with (and sometimes counter) these biological aspects; assumptions about sexuality — the erotic or libidinal economy of who does what to whom, and under what circumstances; and assumptions about sexual orientation (1997: 226).

As the festival participant above revealed, the festival site facilitates the negotiation and enactment of sexual identities which lie beyond the bounds of the heteronormative assumptions embodied within dominant sexual social scripts. Since compulsory heterosexuality, and sex/gender performances in general, are enforced in ways that most often encompass varying degrees of emotional and/or physical coercion in the world at large, the site becomes, for many women, a safe, or at least safer, place in which to live out particular styles of oppositionally conceived lesbian subjectivities. As bell hooks suggests:

Our living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often impoverished. Theorizing about experience aesthetically, critically is an agenda for radical cultural practice. For me this space of radical openness is a margin — a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a “safe” place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance (1991: 149).

For many attendees, the festival provides a community of resistance in which to “safely” conceptualize and enact alternative sex and gender identities. One participant declared that “part of the safety [at Michigan] is that it’s

overwhelmingly lesbian and you don't have a heterosexual assumption, it's a lesbian assumption" (Anonymous, 1997). Another expressed her feelings about the relationship between her gender identities and the festival space in this way: "some days (hours) I feel butch, other days (hours) I feel femme; I change my own oil and like silk — I resist labels. I feel more comfortable being however I feel here than in other spaces... I don't have to check to see if how I want to be is appropriate to the space (physical) I'm in" (Anonymous, 1997). And a third woman said, "it's nice to be in a place where my sexuality is not an issue, where being a lesbian is the dominant culture and I don't have to think about who's looking, who might see me and report me to my boss; who's looking" (Anonymous, 1997). In this sense, safety is experienced in the context of a privacy that emerges from the site's spatial and ideological remoteness from the everyday surveillance of the heteronormative gaze. As in the space of "home," the festival is understood as a space in which she can be "offstage...free from surveillance" (Johnston and Valentine 1995: 100).

Keith and Pile suggest that "for those who have no place that can safely be called home, there must be a struggle for a place to be" (1993: 5). Since the festival forms an umbrella community, "a place to be" that brings together women from a diversity of geographic and social locations, the struggles they face, both inside and outside the festival, are not one and the same. Festival participants "pack and carry tropes and logics from their [Other] homelands [as] they seek out an 'imagined community' of 'intrinsic queerness'" (Sa'nchez-Eppler and Patton 2000: 10).

Just as the struggles of attendees reflect their own lived specificity, the festival community is imagined in ways that emerge from the particularity of lived experience. As in spatialities particular to diasporic subjectivities, within the social imaginaries of festival participants "momentary and ever-shifting lines [are] drawn between inside and outside, oppressor and oppressed, same and other... These lines stress inter-connection as much as distinction" (Keith and Pile 1993: 18). The ongoing interplay between notions of interconnection and distinction among the women who attend the festival is partially revealed in the physical layout of the site. The allocation and demarcation of identity-based spaces upon the festival grounds illustrate that "space is not an innocent backdrop to position, it is itself filled with politics and ideology" (Keith and Pile 1993: 4).

The site is overwhelmingly comprised of differentiated places and spaces which express and/or challenge the identity politics of attendees. While some

spaces are traversable and open to all festival participants, others, like the worker area and womyn of color tent, carry with them more rigid physical and symbolic boundaries. (Festival attendees are prohibited from visiting the worker area; the womyn of color tent is perceived by many as a location where white-identified women are unwelcome.) General camping areas are supplemented with sites designed to accommodate specific needs of the festival goers; these include “scent free”, “quiet camping”, “chem-free” (drug and alcohol free), as well as “loud and rowdy” camping and the S/m play space.³ While “loud and rowdy” camping and the S/m play space are located at the periphery of the festival site, space set aside for women over fifty, as well as for women with disabilities are more centrally located. The spatial semantics of the site then, tells a tale of values and morality — one implicated with the historicity of feminist and queer politics — as well as one of logistics and practicality. The development, appropriation, and occupation of particular spaces speaks to ways in which women negotiate identity, preference, and inclusion at the festival and results in a play of signification where “inner landscapes of identity overlay the geographical definitions of identity found at the festival. This overlay results in the reflection of the diversity of the festival population through the physical arrangement of the site” (Birdsell *et al.* 1998: 99).

Tensions between presences and absences, the figuring and refiguring of which and how subjects are to occupy the politically and emotionally implicated spaces of collective identity, work to shape the contours of the physical terrain upon which the festival community assembles each year. Festival participants remember well, for instance, the ways in which the sex wars of the 1980s divided feminist communities through challenging lesbian-feminist notions of authentic feminist sexual identity, and how this played out in the creation of an S/m play area at the periphery of the site.

Framed by many as the “pro-sex/anti-porn debates”, the sex wars (see e.g. Vance 1984) continued to be negotiated within and upon the festival terrain into the 1990s, as more and more women sought to forefront Other sexualized identities and legitimize their place in the community. The problematic privileging of a particular style of “lesbian” identity, one rooted in the legacy of radical and cultural feminist politics which gave the festival its beginnings, led to a marginalization of sadomasochist practitioners and the imagery they sought to forefront on the land.

3. S/m is generic reference to sadomasochist sexual practice.

In response to a survey questioning women's gender and sexual identity and their effects on women's experiences of the festival, one woman wrote: "Sm dyke, in some years it has been difficult to be accepted by others — freedom of expression or clothing choices". Another woman responded, "[i]nclusive only because we are claiming our space — to be completely inclusive much education would be needed". And when asked who she thought the festival wanted to attract, another woman stated, "[r]ich Lesbians, not dykes, Tgers⁴, SM and kids or anyone that is not gonna bring money, but we claim our space".

In S/m communities "freedom of expression" manifests itself in distinctive types of sexual practices, but also through a particular economy of signs, the most public of which can be seen in "clothing choices" like leather gear. The most active and organized protests against S/m, conceived of as pornography by some anti-porn festival attendees, were to take place in the 1994 festival, when women picketed the night stage Tribe 8 concert. Johnson remembers: "These issues had slowly been bubbling up in the worker camp, especially over the past 10 years around all the S/m stuff, and it suddenly came to a major head...the big freak-out that happened was around the whole Tribe 8 conflict" (1998). As an alternative punk rock band, Tribe 8 offered a new theatrics of anger and empowerment — one which diverged greatly from previous festival performances. Lighting guitars on fire and cutting off strap-on dildos with chain-saws to the tune of songs like "Castrate the Frat-Boy", Tribe 8's performative politic caused many women to either rethink or passionately defend their notions about the kinds of imagery appropriate to a womyn-only space.

Calls of "pornography on the land" erupting from the inclusion of S/m imagery reflected not only the notion of an ideological or sexual transgression, but also the notion of a spatial transgression; pornography, it suggests, whether understood as S/m leather gear or the sexualized performance of a punk rock band, belonged not to womyn's land, but rather, to the flawed and sexually oppressive world beyond the festival gates. Its inclusion was seen by some as a severe transgression of lesbian-feminist space: "you wouldn't have seen

4. Tgers refers to transgender folks who, by virtue of the womyn-born-womyn-only policy, are officially excluded from attending the festival. Festival policy prohibits the questioning of anyone's gender identity, and as such, many festival attendees understand the policy as analogous to the U.S. military's "don't ask/don't tell" policy.

something like Tribe 8 twelve years ago; its like, gee, we used to do goddess circle dances over there and now it's the mosh pit" (Anonymous 1997).

One festival worker identified the mosh pit as a space which facilitated unity among festival participants:

After the whole Tribe 8 controversy, all those women standing in the back with their posters; you know "Tribe 8 promotes violence toward women"; then this whole moshing thing happens at the end of their performance — all of these women are flying off the stage, you know, old, young, black, white, brown — everybody was just doing it. The performed aspects of some of these things really have a profound effect in persuading people that lots of things they think, or when they speak about them are not OK, but when they actually get to be part of the performance of them they feel a whole lot better. It's really quite amazing (Johnson 1998).

Tribe 8's performative politic, once actively protested at the festival as promoting violent imagery, even violence against women, has, in recent years, been increasingly embraced by festival participants. In the same way, the use of S/m leather gear, once contested and even protested, has found its way into the craft booths and the festival mainstream, and an area referred to as the Twilight Zone now serves as the unofficial S/m play area. Moreover, transformations in the content and frequency of sexualized, and sometimes hands-on, workshops mark a shift from the lesbian feminist and cultural feminist sexual politics of the previous decades. The incorporation of S/m spaces, both official and unofficial, has worked to transform and broaden notions of legitimate community identity. In this case, difference and differentiation based in sexual practice has worked itself out in both discursive and spatialized modes.

Keith and Pile note that

[p]olitically, there is a reactionary vocabulary of both the identity politics of place and a spatialized politics of identity grounded in particular notions of space. It is the rhetoric of origins, of exclusion, of boundary-marking, of invasion and succession, of purity and contamination (1993).

Such rhetorical strategies are deployed by women at the festival not only as a means of keeping "undesirables" out, but also as a means of maintaining community membership. For instance, while the festival promotes itself as "for all womyn", the maintenance of a primarily lesbian constituency has left some women who identify as heterosexual or bisexual feeling the tensions of

their minority identity. Sexual social scripts at the festival — those marked by a “lesbian assumption” — facilitate a reversal of the complexities of “coming-out” faced by sexual minorities in the larger world. In response to a questionnaire seeking to elucidate the ways in which gender and sexual identities affect the experiences of women at the event, one woman stated: “I am bisexual. Most women here assume I’m lesbian, which doesn’t bother me, but I worry that women will think I’m passing or trying to deceive them if I don’t explain that I’m bisexual immediately; I feel as if I’m constantly having to tell my life story” (Anonymous 1997). Another woman responded, “I’m with a man but it’s HIM not necessarily his maleness that I love and choose to be with. I tend to avoid mentioning him here, not wanting to offend; also not wanting to bring him into this space” (Anonymous 1997).

Such statements speak to the mobility and fluidity of “the closet”, revealing how, in queer spaces, a kind of heterosexual closet can, and does manifest, albeit in ways different from those produced by the systemic forces of heterosexism and homophobia in the larger world. The strategy of “not mentioning” her male lover reveals how presence at the festival can require discursive absences which delimit the potential range for self-expression among some festival attendees. The desire “not to bring him into this space” reflects an underlying desire to comply or ally with the most explicit boundary strategy employed by the festival community: that is, the official womyn-born-womyn policy.

For many women then, safety is constructed partly, and for some women primarily, in terms of male exclusion: “it’s a place,” said one participant, “where I feel completely and totally safe; I never have to look over my shoulder, I can go anywhere I want any time of the day or night in any state of dress or undress and never have to worry about anything” (Anonymous 1997). While the sign “Womyn” largely signals lesbian identity at the festival, it is also deployed in the more conventional/biological sense: Womyn-born-womyn may attend, regardless of their sexual identifications; Others — meaning men — may not. Implicit in the Womyn-born distinction is, of course, the existence of yet another Other, and the question of transsexual participation has challenged community identity in a number of ways.

The call “Men on the Land”, once shouted out in response to the invasion of male locals, has been redeployed in recent years, particularly since 1994, when transgender activist Leslie Feinberg, along with the rest of “Camp Trans”, set up a camp outside the festival gates in protest of the womyn-born-womyn policy. While festival policy precludes actively questioning an individual’s sex

or gender, the womyn-born policy explicitly excludes *self-identified* transsexuals. What emerges from this system is a kind of don't ask/don't tell field of relations. Thus, in this case, space becomes more easily transgressed than does a discourse of binary sex distinctions. Transsexual space at the festival remains outlaw space as long the womyn-born-womyn policy remains. One festival worker remarked:

People just needed to pretty much make a claim for transgender females as being different from biological females, so that they should have their own festival. People felt really good about the idea that Camp Trans was across the road. That's where the whole issue of a fluid consideration of gender really does break down... They couldn't see it as a political struggle; they saw it as men dressed up as women trying to push their way into a women only festival (Johnson 1998).

While self-identified transsexuals are excluded from the event, it is also true that "many women had at least tacitly agreed that there were transgender women coming on the land" (Johnson 1998). The tacit agreement to allow "closeted" transsexual participation reflects "the processes through which identity boundaries stretch and contract in response to particular communicative environments" (Gamson 1997: 195). For S/m, heterosexual, and transsexual identified women, the emotional and physical negotiation of the festival space brings with it a set of problematics particular to the negotiation of the dominant sexual social scripts which emerge at the festival each year. These divergent positionalities challenge a majority identity based in lesbian, woman-born, and non-S/m sexual practices and identities. Gayle Rubin argues that "anti-sex feminist's anti-porn, anti-S/m, and anti-trans positions work to preserve heterosexuality as the paradigm for natural sexual relations through the identification of sexual minorities as deviant" (1984).⁵ While this is a contested notion, it seems clear that the anti-porn and anti-trans feminists do actively work to preserve a paradigm for sexual relations based in lesbian-feminist sexual politics.

Conclusion

For some women, as an imagined site of homecoming, The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival evokes notions of safety, familiarity, and authenticity; it manifests in the minds of its constituents as a site in which to actively resist

5. The terms "anti-sex" and "anti-porn" are often used interchangeably. Most anti-porn feminists, however, would not self-identify as anti-sex.

the coercion of the heteronormative worlds from which we come. Self-described in its publicity as “a reoccurring dream....a female Brigadoon that rises from the mist each year...”, it is mythologized by organizers and participants as prefigurative: a community which holds utopian possibility. Packing with us imaginings of communities of intrinsic queerness specific to our own experiences, histories, and desires, we attend each year seeking to simultaneously occupy spaces of affinity and specificity. We do so with varying degrees of success.

As with the boundary strategies invoked and deployed in constructions and performances of nation and citizenship, sets of inclusions and exclusions created by claims to collective self are continually challenged and transfigured by the inherent diversity of the constituent in any imagined community. The cultural occlusions and disjunctures which mark the coalescence of festival participants reveal the ways in which “Western sexual and diasporal discourses are fundamentally, if anxiously related” (Sa’nchez-Eppler and Patton 2000: 2). They also speak to dynamic process underlying “the collective paths of queer escape and reconstitution” (Sa’nchez-Eppler and Patton 2000: 2). The festival site provides an arena for the exploration of the complex physical and symbolic intersections that occur when the multiple subjectivities of a kind of diasporic community come to play out within the boundaries of a physical space.

The 1998 festival program reveals the contradictions and complexities inherent in building *a* community identity which reflects and meets the needs of women who occupy divergent — and sometimes oppositionally conceived — identities based in a politics of resistance. It reads:

We create and experience a unique culture here. One that is made up of the many communities we come from, combined with what is truly unique and tangible on the land. Like any culture, we have our own deeply felt ethics and guidelines... knowing that we have an opportunity to create community that can reflect the values and priorities that are truly important to *us* [my italics].

The exact identity of the *us* in this rendering of the festival community remains ambiguous within the context of a unitary deployment of cultural identity, and perhaps its ambiguity holds as many prospects as it does problematics. Joshua Gamson suggests: “The *us*” of the Michigan festival, as of all collective identities, “is solidified not just against an external *them* but also against the *thems* inside, as particular subgroups battle to gain or retain legitimate *us* standing” (1997: 180). But the ambiguity of the *us* of the Michigan

festival can be read another way. Its indistinct ontology provides as many possibilities for openings as it does closures — possibilities for the crossing and blurring of borders and boundaries problematically reified by a politics of identity based on territorialization.

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1997. The Interpretation of Culture(s) After Television. In *The Fate of Culture: Geertz and Beyond*, ed. Sherry Ortner, a special issue of *Representations*, 59: 1-13.
- Anonymous. 1997. *Oral History Workshop: Michigan Womyn's Music Festival*. Interviewed by Amanda Birdsell, Maria Fowler, Jane Leverick. Used by permission.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.
- Birdsell, Amanda, Maria Fowler and Jane Leverick. 1998. A Room of One's Own: Unity or Division? In *Proceedings and Abstracts of the 8th Annual Apala Student Conference*, 98-103.
- Carpenter, Inta Gale. 1996. Festival as Reconciliation: Latvian Homecoming in 1990. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 33, 2: 93-124.
- Eder, Donna, Suzanne Staggenborg and Lori Suddert. 1995. The National Women's Music Festival: Collective Identity and Diversity in a Lesbian Feminist Community. *The Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 23, 4: 485-515.
- Edwards, David. 1994. Afghanistan, Ethnography, and the New World Order. *Cultural Anthropology*, 9: 345-360.
- Esman, Marjorie R. 1982. Festivals, Change and Unity: The Celebration of Ethnic Identity among Louisiana Cajuns. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 55, 4: 199-210.
- Gamson, Joshua. 1997. Messages of Exclusion: Gender, Movements, and Symbolic Boundaries. *Gender and Society* 11, 2: 178-199.
- Greenhill, Pauline. 1997. Who's Gonna Kiss Your Ruby Red Lips: Sexual Scripts in Floating Verses. In *Ballads into Books: The Legacies of F. J. Child*, eds. Tom Cheesman and and Sigrid Rieuwerts: 225-235. Bern: Peter Lang.
- hooks, bell. 1991. *Yearning: Race Gender and Cultural Politics*. London: Turnaround.
- Johnson, Janet (pseudonym). 1998. *Interviewed by Birdsell and Fowler*. Used by permission.
- Johnston, Linda, and Gill Valentine. 1995. Wherever I lay my Girlfriend, That's my Home: The Performance and Surveillance of Lesbian Identities in Domestic Environments. In *Mapping Desire*, eds. David Bell and Gill Valentine: 99-113. Routledge: London.
- Keith, Michael, and Steven Pile. 1993. Introduction Part 1: The Politics of Place. In *Place and the Politics of Identity*, eds. Keith Michael and Steven Pile: 1-21. Routledge: London.

- Marcus, George. 1997. What Is at Stake — and Is Not — in the Idea and Practice of Multi-sited Ethnography. In *Using Multi-sited Ethnography: Investigations of a Methodological Proposal*, eds. James Weiner and Lissand Bolton: 6-14, Special Issue of *Canberra Anthropology*, 22, 2.
- Rubin, Gayle. 1984. Thinking Sex. In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed Carole S. Vance. New York: Routledge.
- Sa'nchez-Eppler, Benigno and Cindy Patton. 2000. Introduction: With a Passport out of Eden. In *Queer Diasporas*: 1-14. Duke University Press. Durham: London.
- Taylor, Verta, and Nancy E. Whittier. 1992. Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization. In *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, eds. Aldon Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller: 104-129. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Vance, Carole S. (ed.). 1984. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. New York: Routledge.
- Weisman, Leslie Kanes. 1994. *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man Made Environment*. University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago.